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Huge Arms Cache Seized At Houston Air Terminal

HOUSTON (UPI) — A \$1.2 million cache of arms apparently destined for South Africa — "enough weapons to fight a war" — was seized last night by Customs agents in the largest weapons bust in U.S. history.

Undercover agents swooped down on an Austrian airliner, parked near a private terminal at Houston's Intercontinental Airport, to confiscate the arms and arrest the four-man Austrian crew and two London gun dealers. The plane was also seized.

The six men were held pending a hearing before a U.S. magistrate. Charges of violating the Neutrality Act, exporting military arms without a license from the State Department, were pending.

(Customs regional Public Affairs Officer Charles Conroy said the suspects carried a false State Department license permitting the export of munitions of war, the Associated Press reported.)

(The AP quoted him as saying the weapons were purchased in Connecticut with a letter of credit issued by an European bank.)

Customs officials said a three-week operation, which trailed the weapons from the Colt Arms manufacturing plant in Connecticut to Texas, led to the breakup of the weapons export scheme. Undercover agents even drove the tractor-trailer carrying the arms.

No other details of the operation were given.

One agent said officials seized "enough weapons to fight a war," including 635 fully automatic M-16 ri-

fles, 135 40mm grenade launchers, and an assortment of other arms.

"The total count of the arms was 2,200 weapons seized," Conroy said. "We think the value was about \$1.2 million."

Conroy said the weapons were destined for South Africa, but a Customs source indicated South Africa may not have been the final destination. "There are some things which have not surfaced yet," Conroy added.

The Customs agent in charge says this particular bust represents one of the most flawlessly executed investigations and seizures. We also think this was the biggest seizure in history," Conroy said.

"The arms were on a long-haul trailer-type truck that brought the weapons from Hartford, Conn. It was followed from Hartford by Customs agents and it was driven by Customs agents," he said.

The tractor-trailer was to meet the plane, which was parked at Qualitron Aero Terminal, a terminal used by private craft at Houston Intercontinental. When the men got off the plane to inspect the arms, the truck was backed up to the plane and additional agents moved in.

Customs men said the plane was believed to have been supplied by Montana Airlines, an Austrian company, on a contract basis.

A permanent arms embargo imposed against South Africa by the United Nations Security Council is in effect and is observed by the United States.